

Growing food tester chews up more space

1-year-old Culinary Focus heads to Flower Mound

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An independent firm that tests new menu items for national restaurant chains and food producers is expanding into Flower Mound.

Culinary Focus, whose customers include restaurants like On the Border and Panera and manufacturers like Kraft Foods Inc. and Daisy Brand LP, says its 42,000-square-foot facility will allow for more sensory research and focus group testing.

Culinary Focus conducts research for restaurant and food processor product development, sources ingredients and compiles a manual, addressing any processing rigors the product might undergo. The company also conducts test runs before customers in a focus-group setting.

With the move to Flower Mound, it will grow its space more than seven times over, allowing the 1-year-old company to add more depth to its offerings.

The facility, located within the Corporate Ridge section of Flower Mound's Lakeside Business District, will feature a theater-style conference room that opens up into a commercial kitchen; residential, production and field kitchens; product and flavor development centers and a library resource center.

Rick Medinis and Tyson Erwin of NAI Robert Lynn represented Corporate Ridge developer Champion Partners in the lease.

Live broadcasts

The new facility will enable the company to do live broadcasts of focus group testing events to corporate executives and other key individuals, said Jim Wisniewski, president and founder of Culinary Focus.

The company has established a partnership with a similar operation, Columbus, Ohio-based Epicures Inc.

Epicures' Ohio facility has capabilities comparable to those Culinary Focus has planned for its new offices and serves some of the same clients.

Wisniewski said the addition of new customers and increased demands from those customers drove the need for a move and expansion. "More and more restaurants and food processors are looking for independent people to do their product development for them," he said. "They look to us to develop the best possible products, using the newest ingredients."

Wisniewski has more than 20 years of experience in flavor and seasoning development, product development and sensory products, having worked as a senior scientist in the flavors and seasoning portion of Frito Lay and operating his own related companies.

So far, word-of-mouth has driven the business, which has increased revenue three-fold since its inception. Wisniewski said he expects revenue to grow to about \$60 million by the end of 2008. Culinary Focus currently employs six but plans to bring on another four or five employees by year-end.

Joe Henningsen, former director of business development for Dallas-based la Madeleine Inc., said Culinary Focus helped the company develop jarred products for its so-called retail and club segments.

The French-style café sells salad dressings and soups through retailers like H-E-B, Market Street, Costco and Sam's Club.

"I think a lot of companies out there are looking for out-of-the-box and maybe even some more creative solutions," Henningsen said. "That's definitely the trend that is happening. Sometimes the amount of resources you have are tied up internally. It helps to go outside and get somebody else looking in at your business who can come up with good solutions."

Henningsen said Culinary Focus was able to create retail products that met La Madeleine's specific criteria, that the products use only natural ingredients.